

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Thirteen Ministers for Thirteen States *John Adams to John Jay, Auteuil near Paris, May 8, 1785*

Sir:
... The British Cabinet have conceived doubts whether Congress have power to treat of commercial matters, and whether our States should not separately grant their full powers to a Minister. I think it may be taken for granted that the States will never think of sending separate Ambassadors, or of authorizing directly those appointed by Congress. The idea of thirteen Plenipotentiaries meeting together in a congress at every Court in Europe, each with a full power and distinct instructions from his State, presents to view such a picture of confusion, altercation, expense, and endless delay, as must convince every man of its impracticability. Neither is there less absurdity in supposing that all the States should unite in the separate election of the same man, since there is not, never was, and never will be a citizen whom each State would separately prefer for conducting the negotiation. It is equally inconceivable that each State should separately send a full power and separate instructions to the Ministers appointed by Congress. What an heterogeneous mass of paper, full of different objections, various views, and inconsistent and contradictory orders must such a man pull out of his *porte feuille* [instructions] from time to time to regulate his judgment and his conduct! He must be accountable, too, to thirteen different tribunals for his conduct: a situation in which no man would ever consent to stand, if it is possible, which I do not believe, that any State should ever wish for such a system. . . Yet it is plain. . . that the British Cabinet have conceived a different opinion. . .

It is very possible that the Cabinet of St. James may decline even entering into any conferences at all, upon the subject of a treaty of commerce, until the powers of Congress are enlarged . . .

We ought to attend to considerations of strength and defence. Our situation is different from some of the Powers of Europe, who have neglected their own defence. Switzerland is situated so, that if she should be attacked by one neighbor, she would infallibly be defended by two others. . . Holland, attacked by France, found a friend in England; when attacked by England, France supported her . . . But what are Switzerland and Holland, small Powers limited by nature, so that they never can be great, to the United States of America, destined, beyond a doubt, to be the greatest Power on earth, and that within the life of man. This is so well known, that instead of being overlooked among the Powers, like Holland and Switzerland, we shall be more an object of jealousy than any other upon earth. All the Powers know that it is impossible for any, the proudest of them, to conquer us; and therefore, if we should be attacked by any one, the others will not be fond of undertaking our defence. . . It behooves the United States, then, to knit themselves together in the band of affection and mutual confidence, . . . and I am much afraid we shall never be able to do this, unless Congress are vested with full power . . . of forming treaties of commerce with foreign Powers.

With great esteem, etc.,

JOHN ADAMS

Source

"Emperor Dead" and ther Historic American Dispatches, Edited by
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